



News Release

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Historic Murals Being Restored for Return To Cleveland's Metzenbaum Federal Courthouse

Building's Renovation Creates Space for Paintings 'Lost from View' for 50 Years

CLEVELAND – Packed away and out of sight for nearly 50 years, a series of canvas murals completed in 1911 by American artist Francis Davis Millet (1846-1912) will soon return to the Howard M. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse as part of an extensive renovation of that Cleveland landmark.

The \$44.6 million renovation by the U.S. General Services Administration began in 2002 and is expected to be completed by summer 2005. Preserving the Millet murals and the building's other historic heirlooms is only a small part of the total project, but one that figures prominently in GSA's strategy for renovating the 100-year-old courthouse, says GSA Project Manager Pam Wilczynski.

"GSA's objective," Wilczynski said, "is to modernize the building and make it fully functional and equipped to serve well into its second century. At the same time, we want to preserve its remarkable art and architecture for future generations to enjoy."

Early in the renovation, as large areas were gutted to convert inefficient spaces into modern offices and high-tech courtrooms, the building's elegant marble corridors and staircases were carefully protected with plywood and padding. Historic courtrooms and chambers were locked up, and their rich, allegorical paintings covered with tightly sealed boxes to ward off dust and damage. The Millet murals, however, were removed years ago and damaged in the process.

"We're very fortunate to have recovered the Millet murals," said Alicia Weber, director of GSA's Fine Arts Program. "During all the time they were lost from view, a special part of the building's past was missing."

Historically the murals preserve a less remembered link to the building's origin as Cleveland's main post office in 1910. Though the building also housed the federal courts and customs collector, the post office was listed first among the names carved above the front entrance. As a hub of downtown commerce, the post office was proudly considered an icon of local progress.

The Millet murals, 35 panels entitled "Mail Delivery," were commissioned for the postmaster's office on the second floor. The chamber occupied 950 square feet of prime corner-office space and was said to be "the finest private office of its kind in Ohio." In realistic detail the murals depicted a global array of modes used in the vital job of delivering the mail – by Pony Express in the American West, by dogboat in Kamaschatka, sail and iceboat in the Baltic provinces, aeroplanes in the U.S. and France, by camel in Arabia and on and on around the world.

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The murals also convey some personal footnotes about Millet, said Weber. He was, among other things, a world traveler, a man of many interests and a talented artist widely respected by his peers. He was a drummer boy in the Civil War, a graduate of Harvard, a newspaper reporter and editor, a student at the Royal Academy of Art in Antwerp, Belgium, and a founder of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School, along with William Morris Hunt and John LaFarge.

He was also a war correspondent for American and British publications during the Russo-Turkish and Spanish-American wars, a genre painter known for his meticulous researching of costuming and historic details, a muralist at the federal custom house in Baltimore and the state capitol in St. Paul, Minn., and a close friend of celebrities of his day, including Mark Twain, Daniel Burnham, John Singer Sargent, Stanford White and Henry James. His paintings are in the collections of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, London's Tate Gallery, the Detroit Institute of Art, Atlanta's High Museum of Art, and Harvard University Art Museum.

Millet was chosen to do the murals for the postmaster's office by Arnold W. Brunner, the architect of the Beaux-Arts edifice on Cleveland's Public Square. Previously Millet had worked with other notable architects, including Burnham who hired Millet as director of decorations and to organize special events to draw attendance to Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. In Cleveland, Brunner also gave Millet responsibility for deciding the interior color scheme for the new post office-federal courthouse, the first building erected under the Cleveland Group Plan that set the style and scale of later civic buildings in downtown Cleveland.

Millet's murals and the postmaster's elegant office remained intact even after the post office moved to a larger location in 1934. The Collector of U.S. Customs became the new tenant of the corner office on the second floor and remained there until 1955, when more space had to be found for the federal courts. The canvas murals were peeled from the walls and soon all traces of the postmaster's office vanished, making way for a courtroom.

The murals – stacked and crated – moved from storage room to storage room, always on federal premises but nearly forgotten for 25 years. In the 1980s, alerted to their fragile condition, GSA began a long search for funds and ways to conserve and care for them. Initially, loose bits of a lead-based adhesive and pieces of plaster were removed from the back of the canvases so the murals could be safely handled and properly stored. Afterward they were moved to a newly acquired GSA fine arts storage facility in Alexandria, Va..

By 1997 the murals were part of a national program by GSA to conserve its collection of more than 17,000 paintings, sculptures and other works of art commissioned by the federal government since the 1850s. Over the last eight years the conservation program has provided \$197,000 to conserve the Millet murals and other historic artwork at the Metzenbaum courthouse.

The painstaking work of restoring and preserving the murals is being done at McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory Inc., Oberlin, Ohio. Robert G. Lodge, president of the firm, describes the process as labor intensive and requiring continuous concentration. It begins with filling uneven spots in the plaster and old adhesive clinging to the back of the canvases. The reverse side must be flat so each

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canvas can be smoothly adhered to an aluminum-panel backing. Surface distortions are removed as canvas and backing are joined in a heated vacuum table. After the murals are mounted, the original painted surfaces are cleaned – but uniformly so that one painting doesn't seem brighter than another.

Lodge estimates the restoration work, underway since January this year, will probably exceed 1,200 hours. More than half that time will be devoted to inpainting areas where paint was lost. In many cases the losses are along stretch marks caused when workers tugged on the canvases to peel them loose from walls in the postmaster's office.

The inpainting never covers original paint, said Lodge. It is always confined to areas where paint was lost. "The inpainter must match color, texture and the original handling of adjacent paint," he said. "It is work that demands continuous focus, sitting still and sometimes concentrating on one small area six hours a day."

Lodge expects the mural conservation to be completed by this September. His firm will then begin preparing for the next step: reinstalling the Millet murals in the courthouse after an absence of 50 years. When the building reopens in 2005, the murals will have more public prominence than they were originally given. Instead of decorating a second-floor private office, they will be displayed in a first-floor public area just inside the main entrance of the courthouse. It took Lodge, GSA and Westlake Reed Leskosky, architect for the Metzenbaum renovation, several months to determine the best location for the murals – a space easily accessible to the public and large enough to properly show all 35 scenes.

Paul E. Westlake Jr., managing principal and lead designer of the architectural firm, said selecting the location involved an "exhaustive technical analysis" of light levels, models of the space and arrangement of the murals. "The space that's been chosen, along with its lighting, palette of colors and materials, will present the murals to best advantage while preserving the historic integrity of the courthouse," he said.

The care and concern now being given the Millets is only appropriate for what they represent, said Weber. "The original works of art in GSA's Fine Arts Collection represent the history, culture and ideals of our country. It is the goal of the Fine Arts Program to conserve these commissioned civic works of art and make them available to the American people," she said.

After finishing his murals for the new federal building in Cleveland, Millet completed one more mural for a courthouse in New Jersey in 1911. He then went to Europe to attend to business affairs as secretary of the American Academy in Rome. After returning to the United States in January 1912, he went back briefly to Europe and then hurriedly booked passage home to arrange an important series of decorative paintings in Madison, Wis. He sailed on the Royal Mail Ship Titanic. At age 65 he was among the 1,500 persons who died when the Titanic sunk on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic.

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